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ABSTRACT

As more Anglo trainees choose multicultural counseling as a specialty area, a closer examination of white on white professional activity would appear imperative. Researchers mailed questionnaires to 48 counseling psychology students in a graduate-level program at a Midwestern university. The surveys requested a general description of trainees' reactions to classroom sessions committed to multicultural literature presentations and discussions. Of the 39 students who completed the survey, 26 indicated an overall positive reaction to the presentation and discussion of multicultural issues, while 13 students gave an overall negative reaction. This latter group reveals that a critical mass of practitioners/researchers completed course work and yet rejected the concepts of multiculturalism and diversity. All trainees perceived each other as competent in service delivery, even though some trainees reported that multiculturally reactive (negative) students exhibited disrespect for content, the classroom process, the instructor(s), and peers who voiced different perspectives. Since no penalties exist for disrespectful students, an insensitivity to diversity can remain a constant among trainees in, and graduates of, training programs with multicultural counseling content. Further study of this problem, using larger samples, is recommended. (RJM)

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The Multiculturally Responsive vs. the Multiculturally Reactive: A Study of Perceptions of White Counselor Trainees

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Abstract

White counselor trainees' survey responses, in general, indicated a belief that sensitivity to and appreciation for diversity and perceived counseling competency were unrelated.

White counselors are often challenged by multicultural counseling literature to examine their beliefs about "Whiteness" and views of racism (Corvin & Wiggins, 1989; Helms, 1984; Ponterotto, 1988). However, the current impetus for this self-examination remains solely in the area of service delivery to minority clients. While it is widely purported that counselors' degree of sensitivity to diversity will significantly influence clients' experiences and counseling process (D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991; Helms, 1984; Ponterotto, 1988; Ottavi, Pope-Davis, & Dings, 1994), the influence of exposure to diversity related curriculum on dynamics among White trainees and professionals remain unexamined.

Given that the majority of counselors, counselor educators, supervisors, and trainees are White and middle-class (Sue & Sue, 1990), understanding if and/or how the professional challenge to move toward higher stages of White racial identity has affected perceptions of professional activities among Whites would seem critical. As the APA recommends the infusion of multicultural counseling content into all core courses and/or at least one multicultural counseling course, and as increasing numbers of White trainees are choosing multicultural counseling as a specialty area, a closer examination of White on White professional activity would appear imperative.

To what degree are White trainees embracing the literature addressing multicultural issues in counseling? What are White trainees' reactions to peers who do not share their views of

diversity? To what degree do White trainees believe their views are shared by peers? How are these views exhibited in the classroom during sessions addressing diversity? Do White trainees perceive peers who differ in reaction to diversity as competent counselors?

Attending to these previously unaddressed questions will allow the profession to begin to develop some understanding of the challenges to be confronted by future professionals and the implications of current required multicultural training on White on White professional activities (i.e., counseling supervision, training, consultation, service delivery to clients, etc.). Attending to these questions will assist the many racial/ethnic minority trainees and professionals in more clearly understanding the dynamics among Whites in academic settings when diversity related discussions arise.

Given that this will be the first study to specifically address this topic, the researchers have chosen a formulative or exploratory design with the intent to: 1) gain familiarity with an unexamined phenomenon; and, 2) gather information about a segment of our profession that is often overlooked: the culturally sensitive vs. the multiculturally reactive White trainee.

Method

Setting

The study occurred within an APA-approved Department of Counseling Psychology which included both doctoral and masters

level academic programs. One multicultural counseling course was required of all doctoral students and all departmental coursework was infused to varying degrees with diversity related content. This department was housed within a large, predominantly White, state university which was located in the midwest region and had an overall student population of approximately 26,000.

Participants

At the time of data collection, forty-eight (14 doctoral level and 34 masters level) students met the criteria for inclusion in this study. (These forty-eight students represented a close approximation of all active pre-internship doctoral and advanced masters level students at the time of data collection.) All students surveyed were White and had attained at least a grade of "B" in core courses entitled "Counseling Laboratory", "Counseling Theory", "Client Issues", and "Multicultural Counseling" within a two year period before data collection. The first two courses were prerequisites of the latter two. The first three courses were required for both masters and doctoral level students, whereas the latter course was only required of doctoral level students and was known as a popular elective for masters level students. All four courses were taught by different faculty, infused to varying degree with multicultural counseling content, and were offered no more than once per academic year. These criteria were chosen in order to maximize the probability of: sampling all masters level

students near program completion as well as currently active pre-internship doctoral level students; sampling students' after enrollment in coursework wherein diversity would have been discussed most recently; sampling students' reactions after having the opportunity to most recently observe peers' classroom behaviors in several classroom settings with several different faculty; and, sampling students after they have had the opportunity to most recently observe peers' counseling performances. Thirty-nine (81.25%) doctoral and advanced masters level, White graduate students completed and returned the survey packets. Three (6.25%) packets were returned because of students' address changes had not been noted within the department records. Three (6.25%) blank surveys were returned within the researcher addressed stamped envelope. No other packets were returned. No response was received from approximately nineteen percent (n=9) of the population who met research criteria. Two of the non-respondents were doctoral level trainees, while all others were masters level trainees. No other identifying information distinguished those who returned surveys from those who did not.

Procedure

Participants meeting the criteria were mailed survey packets and researcher-addressed stamped envelopes (N=48). The survey cover letter described the purpose of the study as being an examination of trainees' perceptions of peers whose reacted differently to instructor presentations and classroom discussions

addressing issues of diversity (i.e., race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability). The cover letter also stated that the return of the packet with a two-week time interval was an indicator of consent for participation. No other identifying information, besides age, sex, and geographical origin, was required and information about individual participants was held in strict confidence. Postcards were mailed two weeks after the packet mailing in order to encourage the return of materials.

Survey Description

The first section of the researcher developed survey requested the demographic information indicated above (i.e., age, sex, geographical origin, cumulative GPA, number of previous courses addressing diversity prior to enrollment in current program). The second section of the survey requested a general description of trainees' reaction to classroom sessions committed to multicultural literature presentation and discussion. Trainees were requested to indicate if their overall reaction to diversity related content addressed in departmental courses as being either positive or negative. The third section of the survey included the following questions:

1. What portion of the students in your classes do you think shared your reaction to the presentations and discussions of issues related to diversity? (The Likert scale ranged from none, indicated by 1, to all, indicated by 7.)

2. Think about those people who did not share your view of diversity. Briefly state your personal reaction to members of this group whose reactions indicated a different response than yours?
3. What did they (those whose opinion differed from yours) do or say to cause your response? If possible, provide examples.
4. How would you rate the overall competency of members of this group as counselors? (The Likert scale ranged from incompetent, as indicated by 1, adequately competent, as indicated by 3, to very competent, as indicated by 5.)

Results

The mean participant age was 31.02 years. Mean cumulative GPA was 3.34 (4-point scale). Sixty-seven percent (n=26) were female and 33% (n=13) male. Approximately twenty-five percent (n=10) were doctoral level trainees; and, seventy-five percent (n=29) were masters level. All, but three, of the participants had origins in midwestern states. None of the participants had coursework addressing diversity prior to enrollment in the current program.

Twenty-six (66.6%) of the surveys received indicated an overall general positive reaction to the presentation and discussion of multicultural issues (multiculturally responsive students), while 13 (33.3%) indicated an overall negative reaction (multiculturally reactive students).

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of responses to survey items. Three separate *t*-tests resulted in no significant ($p<.05$) differences between the multiculturally responsive and reactive student groups on either of the two Likert scale survey items or GPA. Both groups: 1) perceived that approximately one-half of their peers agreed with their perspective of the course content; and, 2) perceived their peers as adequately (rating of 3.34) competent. Although the mean scores were not found to be significantly different, responses to this item addressing perceived competency ranged from one to five for the multiculturally responsive students, and three to four for the multiculturally reactive students.

(Table 1 inserted here.)

Table 2 presents a summary of students' responses to the survey item: What were some of the behaviors peers exhibited during class sessions addressing diversity that communicated disagreement and/or dissatisfaction with content. There is no table for multiculturally reactive students' responses given that only one such student addressed this item. This one response indicated a belief that sensitive students were "sucking up" to the instructor in a display of agreement.

(Table 2 inserted here.)

Table 3 presents a summary of students' responses to survey item: What was your personal reaction to members of this group who experienced the presentation and discussion of multicultural literature differently? The most frequent response (42.3%)

provided an explanation for the observations by attributing peers' discontent with the topic to their fear of 'difference' and an unwillingness to introspect about issues of diversity. The least frequently stated reactions indicated either a challenge to the department to remove such students from the program (anger) (7.6%) or the experience of a sense of intimidation by the more vocal dissenters (fear) (3.8%).

(Table 3 inserted here.)

Table 4 presents a summary of multiculturally reactive students' responses to the survey item: What was your personal reaction to members of this group who experienced the presentation and discussion of multicultural issues differently? The most frequently stated response indicated that peers who accepted the multicultural literature had a knowledge deficit that was in need of correction.

(Table 4 inserted here.)

Discussion

First, findings suggest that even training in programs that include the infusion of multicultural content in all courses, as well as coursework specifically addressing diversity, does not result in the same degree of heightened levels of sensitivity for all trainees. In fact, given the results of this study, approximately one-third of the students would perceive the exposure to multicultural literature as meaningless and unnecessary. This does not appear to be an issue of trainees only having varying levels of sensitivity to diversity, but

a reality that a critical mass of practitioners/researchers could pass coursework and graduate actually rejecting the concepts of multiculturalism and appreciation of diversity.

Second, both trainees who did and did not embrace the concept of multiculturalism, perceived each other as adequately competent in service delivery. This is particularly interesting in the case of trainees who reported many observations of multiculturally reactive trainees' behaviors that clearly exhibited disrespect to content, classroom process, the instructor(s), and to peers with different perspectives. The connection between multicultural awareness and racial identity with counseling competency (Ottavi, Pope-Davis, & Dings, 1994; D'Andrea, Daniels, & Heck, 1991) was not supported by these findings. In this study, most of the trainees who did embrace the multicultural literature tended to perceive peers who rejected the literature as just as competent as counselors as those who rejected the literature perceived them. In addition, grading indicated that faculty, after having been exposed to the same behaviors as the "sensitive" students, continued to "pass" insensitive students in these core courses. (This is particularly important to note given that one of these courses was multicultural counseling.)

Although a predominant response pattern has been highlighted above, it is important to mention the less represented voice that did occur within this survey sample. Responses of five participants' comments indicated a relationship between a

negative response to multicultural literature and counseling incompetence. Responses of three of these trainees suggested that multiculturally reactive trainees' service delivery be limited to only White clients; two participants believed that those unwilling to more respectfully accept multiculturalism were unfit to counsel anyone, racial majority or minority clientele. All five of these trainees also expressed a need for additional training to continue toward a multicultural counseling specialty. Why some White trainees adopted this response instead of the more predominant one indicated above, is not answered in this study. However, it is important to note that these five were the only participants whose survey responses indicated any affective reactions to peers with opposing views (i.e., disgust, anger, frustration, fear).

In summary, these findings combined offer one possible explanation for why insensitivity to diversity can remain a constant among trainees in and graduates from APA-approved training programs infused with multicultural counseling content: There remains no implicit or explicit penalty for disrespectful, unempathic, acting out tendencies of the "multiculturally reactive". For example, these results suggest that most "multiculturally responsive" peers are "understanding" or at least tolerant of the openly expressed opposition to the appreciation for diversity, and faculty, in the process of student evaluation, (as indicated by GPA), might be engaging in the same response dynamic as students' peers. Given the

reported perception of equal representation, "multiculturally reactive" White trainees must sense a solid and legitimate power base. Status quo is maintained and reinforced.

Although the authors do believe that this study represents an important contribution to the literature examining within group diversity among White trainees, it is important for readers to note that the authors' intent in this exploratory study was not to provide data that would generalize to the entire population of students represented in all training programs. The within-group diversity among Whites, in general, is well-documented (Helms, 1984; Helms & Carter, 1990; Ponterotto, 1988; Sue & Sue, 1991), however, the perceptions White trainees have of one another in the discussion of multicultural issues remains in its exploratory stage. These "insight-stimulating" survey results were intended to suggest hypotheses for future authors to consider in any attempts to further understand this seldom examined phenomenon: within group dynamics among White trainees in relationship to diversity related issues. Findings also raise key questions that the authors believe the profession as a whole and individual academic departments must address: What are the implications for recruitment and admissions, training, licensure, and hiring practices of the "multiculturally reactive?" What characteristics and personal/professional experiences differentiate multiculturally responsive White trainees who do connect cultural reactivity with counseling incompetence from those who do not? What are the training and

service delivery implications of maintaining a stance of acceptance and validation of those White trainees who openly express disrespect toward those who embrace multiculturalism? How do current practices in student evaluation and course grading accommodate trainees' insensitivity to diversity?

Recommendations for future research addressing this topic would include: a larger sample size from several departments across several geographical regions; and, data collection occurring during either the spring or fall semesters in order to increase the probability of a higher return rate. All would increase the generalizability of the findings. Future research is certainly warranted.

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations and t-test results of Likert scale items by group

Item	Multiculturally Responsive n=26	Multiculturally Reactive n=13	t
What portion of students do you think did not share your reaction to multicultural content?	3.3 sd=1.65	4.0 sd=1.5	1.36
How would you rate the overall competency of peers whose perceptions differed from your own?	3.5 sd=1.08	3.3 sd=.89	.33
GPA	3.45 sd=1.22	3.54 sd=1.01	.46

Neither of the mean comparisons was significant to the .05 level.

Table 2

Comments of Multiculturally Responsive Students' in response to survey item: What did peers do in class(es) that communicated disagreement and/or dissatisfaction with multicultural content

Expressed stereotypical views about race, ethnicity, and gender

Maintained an angry, disrespectful and confrontational demeanor toward the instructor throughout the class periods

Expressed unwillingness to introspect about their reaction to the instructors or content

Presented themselves in a 'narrow-minded' manner. They didn't seem to think that the populations discussed might eventually be encountered in a counseling setting. (e.g., Why do we have to learn about them, if they don't tend to come for services.)

Remained silent and became quite vocal about negative impressions during breaks and after classes.

Withdrew and whispered in dyads or triads as more interested students participated in class discussions.

Referred to racial/ethnic minorities as 'those people' and remained entrenched in their white, middle-class, suburban cultural perspective.

Expressed "I'm bored" or "I know it all" comments that lacked empathy, sensitivity, and respect for other class members as well as to the instructor(s).

Seemed to have difficulty attending to affect of others; comments were always very egocentric.

Table 2

Comments of Multiculturally Responsive Students' responses to survey item: What did peers do in class(es) that communicated disagreement or dissatisfaction with multicultural content (continued)

Made very denigrating comments about class sessions and instructors just loud enough for all to hear.

Expressed the belief that this was not a real class topic and the content was 'irrelevant'. They didn't seem to want to learn anything about themselves or anyone else.

Refused to accept the importance of countertransference in relationship to race, ethnicity, and gender.

Overemphasized their justification for their point of view and refused to entertain the value of any different perspective.

Continued complaining about class exercises long after it was processed and discussed.

Became very judgmental and frustrated when they were asked to express a rationale for their strong affect or their perspective.

Table 3

Summary of Multiculturally Responsive Students' responses to survey item: What was your personal reaction to members of this group who experienced the multicultural content differently?

Reaction	Percent
I believe that they were afraid of difference. I wish they had opened themselves to this experience; it seems that they might have benefited from class sessions if they had chosen to do so.	42.3% (n=11)
I felt fine with their reaction. Struggle is necessary in growth and not everyone will or can develop at the same rate.	26.9% (n=7)
They are entitled to their opinion as I am entitled to mine.	19.2% (n=5)
They should be removed from the program immediately for they are unfit to be in any mental health profession. I believe that training programs should be more selective.	7.6% (n=2)
I was intimidated by them and was afraid to speak out against them.	3.8% (n=1)

Table 4

Summary of Multiculturally Reactive Students' responses to survey item: What was your personal reaction to members of this group who experienced multicultural content differently?

Reaction	Percentage
I really had no personal reaction, however, there were things that I know that would have enlightened them that I didn't share.	38.4% (n=5)
It was okay with me. I believe that their view was just as important as mine.	23.07% (n=3)
No response	38.4% (n=5)